DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 142 955 CS 003 588

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TITLE Word Concept Development Activities.
PUB DATE May 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (22nd, Miami Beach, Florida, May 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Concept Formation; Generalization; *Language Experience Approach; Language Skills; *Learning Activities; Phoneme Grapheme Correspondence; *Reading Instruction; Semantics; Sorting Procedures; *Teaching Techniques; Vocabulary Development; Word Recognition; *Word Study Skills

ABSTRACT

Teachers working with a language experience approach to reading may use word-sorting activities as a means of exploring the letter/sound concepts and semantic concepts that children are forming. Using words that are already in a child's reading vocabulary, words that the child has made into sight vocabulary, and words that the child has requested while composing stories, the teacher asks the child to decide on categories into which the words may be divided. Words may be sorted according to letter/sound relationships, prefix of suffix likenesses and differences, etymological kinships, or semantic relationships. As teachers help the children to see that words may be categorized in different ways, children may recategorize their set of word cards many times. Experience has shown that the less useful categories will be used less and less frequently and that the more useful categories will be used often. As children become more adept at working with words and begin to read more widely, they are encouraged not only to sort old words but to seek out new words for their categories. Such word-sorting activities help children to explore words in a way that is related to other meaningful exploration in reading and using language. (GW)

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University of Virginia
Charlottesville

Presented at the 1977 IRA Convention

Miami, Florida

CS003 588

Word Concept Development Activities

Teachers working with a language experience approach to reading often feel uneasy about what to teach about words. Reading is comprehending and is part of our attempt to make sense out of our world (Estes, 1977); nevertheless, written material is composed of words and we name concepts in our world with words. During the past few years, students at McGuffey Reading Center, under the guidance of Ed. Henderson, have been exploring the use of word sorting techniques as a means of exploring the letter-sound concepts that children form concerning spelling and phonics. These word sorts have also been used to explore meaning, or semantic, categories that children are forming.

Word sorting techniques are based on the assumption that every person, every child will have different members in any category. For instance, let's think about my category for bell, the thing that we used to ring to call school to order. I have, first and foremost, a category for the different meanings I assign to bell.

I can use bell in sentences and stories and I can usually understand it when other people use bell. I can even, when asked, assign it to a category dear (or not-so-dear) to the hearts of reading teachers; I can put bell in a "short E" category. If I am pressed to communicate to children in a class using these terms, I will even say that bell "is a short E word."

I bring up the topic of bell and short E because I recently asked a child to tell me the vowel sound he heard in bell. He knew what word I meant because we had a picture of a bell and he told me what you can use a bell for. Then he answered my question firmly: "Long A," he said, "It rhymes with tell." I wasn't sure which word he meant: t-a-i-l, like a dog wears; or t-e-l-l, what you do to a story. Then he pointed to the word tell.

I might not have been so impressed with this young man's confidence in his judgment had I not been equally certain at one time that bell and tail and tell all rhymed and that the last two sounded exactly alike. In my Alabama dialect and in this young man's dialect, bell "is" a short vowel word. However, a workbook page corrected with a red pencil might convince him that he is really dumb in phonics and spelling; if reading is taught so that letter-sound relationships become too

central, he might even believe that he is dumb in reading.

Elaine Anderson (1975) did an intriguing experiment, not with words, but with common household items: cups and glasses (after Labov (1973)). She took 25 cups and glasses, all different. She asked children aged 3, 6, 9, and 12 to do four tasks: 1) to name the items; 2) to sort them into cups versus glasses (and to put the ones they thought were neither into a leftover pile); 3) to define cup and glass, and 4) to choose the best exemplar for each category (a typicality rating; cf. Rosch, 1975a; 1975b).

Anderson found, as have Read (1975), Henderson (1977), and others that children agree quite a bit; they make enough sense out of any categories in their world to communicate. However, their categories are not completely the same; moreover, the older the child, the more items he or she tended to put in the leftover pile. Their definitions indicated that they realized that category boundaries are vague, are fuzzy. They tended to use explanations that indicated that a drinking vessel was "kindalike" a cup, but we usually call it a glass. Another drinking vessel might be rejected completely; children rejected instances from a category according to how they defined the category,

individually.

Insert illustration about here

Anderson's work is an illustration that all people do not share the same members within any category, even if they use the same title for the category or concept. The young man I described used the title "long A words," but his category included bell, a word that would usually be wrong on any phonics or spelling exercise page. Teachers are often aware, at least implicitly, of the vagueness of our word category concepts in letter-sound relationships; they complain loudly about misleading pictures and questions in games and on worksheets. Teachers often ask for a way of stressing sensible letter-sound relationships in an individual manner yet in a way that will lead to a match with adult spelling and word recognition.

Since I believe that young children may not recognize that our word concept boundaries are vague at the crucial age when they are beginning to read, I have been exploring the use of word sort techniques with children. These sorts are very much like Elaine Anderson's cups and glasses sorts. Her cups and glasses were well-known items in the child's environment. We

use words that are already in a child's reading vocabulary, words which he or she has made into sight vocabulary words, whether they come from a basal reader story, a language experience story, off a cereal box, or from requests in composing an individual story or report.

A teacher may guide a word sort for a beginning reader in a very structured manner; we have called these sorts Structured Word Sorts. With more mature learners, the teacher may allow the child to suggest the categories and to range as widely into letter-sound relationships, prefix or suffix likenesses and differences, etymological kinships, or semantic relationships as he or she wishes. We have called these sorts Open-Ended Word Sorts. Obviously, either type of word sort may be used diagnostically as well as for instructional purposes.

In either form, the basic steps of a word sort are these:

1. Decide the categories and make a place for "leftovers."
2. Sort the word cards under the title or exemplar for each category; put leftovers in the leftover pile.
3. Re-define the category: let the child tell you what he or she is sorting by.
4. Ask for re-affirmation of choices: ask the child

to go down each list and tell you if each one fits his or her definition of the category (strength of decision).

5. Make some distinction between members that fit the category very well and those that are "fuzzy" yet do not quite belong in the leftover pile.

(6. Optional, but very fruitful: collect word sort lists in a personal Wordbook or thesaurus. One convention for "fuzzy" words that we have used in Wordbooks is to put the borderline cases in parentheses. Often a child will decide to remove a parenthesis and declare: "Now that word fits.")

Why go to all this trouble? Because each person will have some different members in his or her category, we should have individual collections rather than all working on a common exercise. Also the child is working from well-processed units, known words rather than perhaps-unknown words. Much workbook time is spent not with words even, but with pictures to represent a category that is actually a word category. We want any word category to be tied to actual words which a child will be reading, not with pictures which are different kinds of abstractions than words are.

More than that, we have made the child the judge and monitor of his categories. We have also built the

basis for helping the child decide what will be memorable and what is worth remembering, for him or for her rather than for the teacher. This places responsibility on the child, but responsibility that the child is capable of assuming.

Recently one child went through five different word sorts before she produced the one that I knew she was capable of doing and needed to do. Yet, along the way, she revealed a wealth of word knowledge; her concept for how words work was becoming more widely branching.

She had worked through a consonant center in which she sorted pictures of things whose names began with relevant sounds and had now collected a number of sight vocabulary words that began with the letter t- including some that began with th-. She had never before sorted by two letters at the beginning of words.

Her cards included these words:

top

Tom

turkey

the

turtle

I asked her to think how these words were alike. She answered that they all began with the letter t-.

I wrote the words in a list and asked her to draw a line under the letter t- at the beginning of each word. THAT was the concept she described to me and she was exactly accurate. The words do begin with the letter t- and I was able to praise her; furthermore, she was aware that the praise was sincere because she set the category and checked the category on her own terms.

She did not, however, give me the concept I had in mind and that the consonant center was designed to help her develop. I think this was a crucial point. She had declared a category or concept for her words that was valid and she had picked examples consistently that fit the category. I could leave it there if that were as far as I thought she could go now, but she had demonstrated readiness for the letter-sound associations for t- and th- by doing the other steps in her consonant center. So, as a teacher I had to decide how to praise her for the concept that she illustrated and still encourage her to try the concept that I had in mine and that I thought would be helpful for her.

I have found it delightful to share with youngsters my realization that words <u>may</u> be categorized in many different ways. So I asked her to re-copy

her letter t- list in her Wordbook; then I asked her to look at the word cards again to see if there were other ways that she could sort them. This time she found the three-letter words: top, Tom, the. Again, she had a valid category with examples that fit her category. The category is still not what I wanted, but we labelled it "three-letter words" in the Wordbook and went on to yet another sort. She finally had five lists: "letter t- words," "three letter words," "living things," "'t' sound words," and "'th' sound words." The titles might offend a purist, but they came primarily from the child and reveal much about her growing conception for how words work.

It is the ability to look at words in many ways, but in stable memorable ways that interests us in word sorts. It has been my experience that the less useful categories will be used less and less frequently and that the more useful categories will be used often. This young lady decided that "three letter words" was not a very useful category for her. She soon had too many words in it that had no useful information tied to the category. The category did not help her remember anything that she wanted to remember and it did not help her predict anything useful about new words.

As children become more adept at working with words and begin to read more widely, we encourage them not just to sort old words, but to actively seek out new words for their categories. We call these seeking activities Word Hunts. In Word Hunts we assume that the child has a fairly good grasp on the categories he is currently using. He may hunt for words which have certain prefixes or suffixes; he may look for nouns or verbs; he may look for words that fit a semantic category. In any case, we still ask the child to "define" the category: What are you looking for? We ask him to state the criterion he is using:

Why did you pick this word for this category?

We ask him for strength of decision:

Does it fit?

I have become increasingly impressed with this approach when I have heard a student say: "Well, you know, this word seems like it could be a noun--then again, it seems like it could be a verb." Or say: "This word just almost seems like it would fit, but it really doesn't for me." These children seem to be saying, along with Elaine Anderson, that they understand that boundaries are vague when you take

a close look.

Anderson might have used a better phrase than "boundaries are vague." She might have said that boundaries are alive, or used some metaphor better expressing the variability of the categories. Her cup and glass research is as intriguing as the children's word sorts, whatever her metaphor. We might claim that the people who "know" the most in any field are those people who sense most strongly the "vagueness" or aliveness of boundaries, or of categories, or of definitions (Wittgenstein, 1958). The lesson I draw is that we must observe and explore the child's concepts for words with them and allow them to share our delight in their alive boundaries. I believe that, in this manner, we will not divorce word exploration from other meaningful exploration in reading and languaging.

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